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RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 7717  
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 3884  
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 0023  
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RUEHLH/AMCONSUL LAHORE 0163  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L COLOMBO 000134

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STATE FOR INL AND SCA/INSB

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA NABS DRUG TRAFFICKERS

REF: 09 COLOMBO 1077

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Valerie Fowler, Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Media is reporting and contacts confirm that Sri Lankan Police and Customs officials have seized over 40 kilos of heroin in the past week in three different drug busts. On February 15, Customs officials reported they had arrested two Pakistani nationals with 83 packets of heroin weighing 720 grams and worth nearly USD 30,000 at Colombo's international airport. On February 18, Police in the Mannar district in northwestern Sri Lanka seized 30.6 kilos of heroin with an estimated street value of USD 870,000-\$1,600,000. And on February 19, a Maldivian and Sri Lankan couple were arrested for possession of 9 kilos of heroin. Heroin use in Sri Lanka remains low, indicating Sri Lanka remains a key transit hub for heroin trafficking in South Asia. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) The February 15 report that Sri Lankan Customs officials had arrested two Pakistani nationals with 83 packets of heroin worth nearly USD 30,000 may demonstrate ongoing regional cooperation in drug interdiction as Customs may have been tipped off by Pakistani counterparts. According to sources, the passports of the accused show multiple previous entries and exits in Sri Lanka, suggesting this may not be the first time the suspects had smuggled drugs into the country. They traveled via Qatar, since officials more carefully scrutinize travelers arriving from Pakistan than from the Gulf States. The drug packets were found hidden in the suspects' abdomen and rectum.

13. (SBU) The dramatic seizure of 30.6 kilos of heroin on February 18 in the Mannar district in northwestern Sri Lanka was the largest drugs seizure in the recent past. The drugs are estimated to have a street value of between USD 870,000 and 1,600,000. Police believe the heroin crossed the Palk Strait by boat into Sri Lanka from India. Local contacts confirm that the Mannar coast is an important transshipment point for narcotics traffickers. The interdicted van only had a driver with a mobile phone with one Colombo-based telephone number in it, although other suspects are reported to have fled the scene. Police are investigating further. The sheer volume of the bust indicates the heroin is bound for a "big time dealer" in the country before being forwarded to other destinations, perhaps the Maldives or Europe.

14. (SBU) On February 19, the Colombo Narcotics Bureau

apprehended two suspects - a Maldivian woman and her Sri Lankan husband - for possession of 9 kilos of heroin. While the media is reporting the two have confessed, no further information is currently available. As noted in Reftel, drug use in Sri Lanka remains low by global standards (with an estimated 55,000 users), and the government generally works well with regional and USG partners to control illegal substances. However, Sri Lanka remains a key transit hub for heroin trafficking in South Asia.

¶15. (C) According to a former Sri Lankan security services official, drug kingpins in Sri Lanka have political patrons in the government, chief among them Dr. Mervyn Silva, a Member of Parliament and the Minister of Labor. His son, Malika Silva, is suspected of trafficking the drug "ecstasy" in Colombo nightclubs.

¶16. (SBU) COMMENT: The recent arrests of narcotics traffickers and heroin seizures paint a disturbing picture. The police assessment that heroin trade is pre-dominantly carried out by the Muslim community is troubling because of the illicit network's destabilizing effects. The February 18 arrest in the Muslim-dominated northwestern region of a Muslim man from an internally displaced persons' camp suggests the potential for criminal exploitation of a vulnerable community.  
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